Tech That Makes Telecommuting Work

By Gabe Goldberg
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The information age has a split personality. Technology improves ever more quickly and we're online everywhere, easily connecting with people around the world. Yet time and money is consumed traveling from place to place by burning the diminishing remains of dinosaurs. Even worse, with gasoline at $4, our gadgets are less consolation while we're stuck in rush-hour traffic.

But technology, gadgets, flexibility and simple steps by employers and workers can achieve the long-promised benefits of telecommuting.

Working successfully from home or another remote location involves more than a creaky computer and slow Internet connection. It requires at least a complete and distinct office, including printer, fax capability (device or Web-based), scanner, copier, desk and mailing supplies, said Stan King, chief executive of Information Technology, based in Falls Church. He also suggests "teleconferencing capability with camera and audio, privacy, quiet and a focus on work rather than watching TV or running errands."

Jeff Savit, principal engineer at [Sun Microsystems](#) in New Jersey, advocates using separate personal and business computers so documents and security issues don't overlap. He likes sharing a common calendar with co-workers, because they "can't see if you're at your desk, so they know where you are and whether you can be reached."

He says that it's worth being "as self-sufficient as possible for all the technology bits," because "even companies with good telecommuting programs will not be as fast to diagnose and fix your problems" as they are for problems of those in the office.

All but the most independent workers need access to a central network, files and servers. Among the most secure and robust technologies for this is VPN, or virtual private network, available from many sources. VPN requires some setup and administration.

Fee-based services such as GoToMyPC.com, free tools such as LogMeIn.com, and native facilities such as Windows' Remote Desktop make an office computer accessible from anywhere there's a computer and broadband connection. If files are shared among central and remote workers, FTP, or file transfer protocol, is a handy way to convey and store them.

Technology can mitigate feelings of isolation and the lack of hall encounters and

water-cooler chats. Bevi Chagnon, president of PubCom in Takoma Park, favors online collaboration and conferencing software such as Adobe Acrobat Connect.

You must "have a way for two or more people to easily -- and I mean easily -- have an online conversation about jobs, tasks, projects," she said.

Other interactive tools such as instant messaging or IRC (Internet relay chat) bridge distance.

Some connections allow administrators to back up data, but following Savit's self-sufficiency mandate requires remote workers to handle complete and regular back up details themselves.

Each remote function demands bandwidth, so a worthwhile investment is a fast Internet connection.

Relatively new technologies allow users to carry applications such as word processing, Web browsing, e-mail, spreadsheets and associated data files on tiny USB drives. These "portable desktop" alternatives can make any computer a functional office.

Being businesslike starts with telephone access. Unlimited service avoids nasty billing surprises. A dedicated line with reliable voice mail and non-cute greeting sets the right tone for callers.

Employer support is necessary for successful telecommuting. Company skills directories to "find the expert" allow teleworkers to contact colleagues quickly. Help desks and information technology staff must recognize and support their invisible brethren.

Workers aren't the only ones who benefit from telecommuting. A recent focus group held by Telework Exchange, an Alexandria-based group that promotes telecommuting, underlined that telework is an important employee recruiting and retention tool.

Addressing societal benefits, a Federal Web site, http://www.telework.gov, highlights how telecommuting enables public and private employers to sustain continuity of operations during natural disasters or terrorist incidents.

Of course, it reduces the economy's dependency on the dinosaur.